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It's all right to be wrong, sometimes

Tan Seow Hon

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Racist comments made by some youths have spawned many reactions from Singaporeans. This presents another interesting issue: Do these reactions themselves evince the kind of intolerance of a diversity of opinions which they are attacking? When and how can we differ without being intolerant and disrespectful?

This was a point raised by Mr Goh Wen Zhong in his column on Monday's YouthInk page in this newspaper. Of the attack with 'derogatory language and a lack of respect for the opinions of the writer' of certain racist comments, he wrote: 'There must be a difference between 'I do not agree with you' and 'You are wrong'. I study in Britain, where freedom of speech and expression prevail, and there is a corresponding maturity in the way issues are debated. The true mark of a developed society lies in the ability of its citizens to keep an open mind and respect each other's views.'

If Mr Goh means to question the use of derogatory language, he makes an important point about the ethics of discourse.

If, however, he is suggesting that the language of right and wrong is in itself the hallmark of intolerance and is always inappropriate in debate, there appears to be a performative inconsistency in his act of writing the column to persuade us of the 'wrongness' of some of our reactions. His column seems to say to us: 'You are wrong to say 'you are wrong', for you cannot say 'you are wrong'.' His act of writing thus defeats the very point he is writing to make.

What may explain the aversion of someone like Mr Goh to the language of right and wrong? Such language, with its implicit (if not explicit) truth claim, has become somewhat unfashionable in postmodern discourse, particularly with the fear of moral fundamentalism.

At first blush, it seems that when someone says something is his personal opinion, discourse is 'safe' because his opinion ranks no higher than ours, whereas if he puts forth an opinion without such qualification and uses the language of right and wrong, he is being intolerant. Is this the case? In reality, one cannot avoid a truth claim in all areas of discourse, though one can be in the process of discovering the truth and hence prefer to put forth a tentative conclusion.

Morality is the classic example of one such area. Legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin helpfully distinguishes 'ice-cream opinions' (as to whether chocolate ice-cream is the best-tasting) from moral judgment. For example, in relation to the moral question of whether slavery is unjust, one might borrow Dworkin's ideas about the groups of people who might deny that slavery is unjust to help us understand what is at stake.

The first group comprises the fascists who believe there is nothing wrong with slavery and that some people deserve to be slaves. They do not deny that moral opinions may be objectively right or wrong. We immediately think fascists are horrible persons for holding such a view, but fascists do not deny they are contending with us - who hold the diametrically opposed view (that slavery is unjust) - within the enterprise of morality. We can challenge them and when we do so, we are trying to find out which of our opinions is the more correct one by reference to an objective standard which we may be trying to figure out. We may show them their views are unviable, for example, when we invoke the golden rule or Kantian categorical imperative against them and require them to put themselves in the shoes of someone being made a slave.

The second are the sceptical philosophers who deny that 'slavery is really unjust' because they believe all moral judgments are a matter of one's subjective opinion and deny that such judgment can be really or objectively true. With such a person, it is not possible to discourse about whose judgment better approximates truth. He does not believe that either his judgment or yours can be correct, because he does not believe any standard of correctness exists.

This categorisation helps us understand several points.

First, it seems more acceptable to be a sceptical philosopher than a fascist when one holds morally repugnant views. It is easier to excuse the racist attitude of a young person, for example, by saying that it is just his personal opinion, which he is entitled to hold, especially since liberalism is now in vogue and each person must be allowed to have a view, however absurd.

If, on the other hand, one realises that the view is held with a truth claim (as in the first category), the view becomes more troubling.

However, what is the practical difference between a young person being a racist in his personal subjective opinion (second category) and believing that racism is all right as a matter of truth (first category)? Either way, left unchecked, he is likely to act on his belief. To my mind, if he were to understand the objectivity of values and his own truth claims, he would be presented with the need to justify his views and become more circumspect about them.

Second, those who claim to be sceptical philosophers of the second category rarely live up to their claim. More often than not, they try to persuade us that their view is better.

While 'better' is on its face different from an approximation of correctness or truth, it connotes the implicit acknowledgment of a standard - a guide by which we know one view is better than another. What is this standard if it is not a reference to values 'outside' of the persons involved in the discourse? Non-sceptics simply refer to them as 'objective values'.

Acknowledging that some views may be wrong and others right is not a mark of immaturity, intolerance, disrespect or ill-will. It only compels one to take discourse and freedom of speech more seriously.